2012-02-24

The Washington Post

At the Monroe Institute, a spiritual experience could just be a beat away

by Theresa Vargas

Howard Broadman wants to see as much as he can before age slows him down, but he wonders if he might have ventured too far this time. He takes a seat at a long wooden table across from a man wearing a cap with a firefighter emblem. Five other people fill the plush white chairs around them, but soon Broadman is listening only to the firefighter, watching a spoon dangle between the man's fingers.

"I've done other programs here," the firefighter is saying. "In one, we learned to bend spoons with our minds."

"And you did it? You bent it?"

"Everyone did it," the firefighter says. Broadman's bushy eyebrows arch high. This is his first dinner at the Monroe Institute, a cluster of buildings perched on more than 300 acres in the Virginia foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. He will spend the next six days here, attending a program that will ask just one thing of him and other participants: to consider that they might be more than their physical bodies.

The institute uses audio technology to help induce different states of consciousness. The technology is touted as creating optimal conditions for the brain, leading to "peak human performance."

Broadman doesn't expect much. A self-described "alpha cynic," he is here for the adventure. In an e-mail his daughter will send — one that he will share with me late one night — she writes, "Hope you're having fun and don't come back weird."

After dinner, Broadman and the rest of the group, 20 people in all, gather in a log cabin. On a mantel sits a bust of the institute's late founder, Robert Monroe, along with this anonymous quote: "I've gone to look for myself. If I should return before I get back, keep me here."

"This is really about you allowing your perception to be open and determining what for you being more than your physical body is," John Kortum, one of two facilitators for the week, tells the group.

Kortum, a flight attendant when he's not at the institute, says he came here after frequent out-of-body experiences.

Broadman's brows rise again. He has never heard that term. When he's alone, he types it into Wikipedia, pulling up an adequate definition: *An out-of-body experience (OBE or sometimes OOBE) is an experience that typically involves a sensation of floating outside of one's body.*

But he will have to wait a few days before he truly understands what it means to transcend everyday consciousness.

***

From Washington, the Monroe Institute is a three-hour drive, past Charlottesville and up a steep, tree-lined road removed from the sounds of traffic and the reliability of cellphone service. Where the road dead-ends, three buildings stand within steps of one another: The cabin, quaint and WiFi-wired, where Monroe wrote two of his books, "Far Journeys" and "Ultimate Journey"; the brick house, where he and his wife lived and meals are now shared; and a two-level dormitory, where, two to a room, we will lie in our respective beds, headphones on, exploring the technology Monroe spent decades developing.

Monroe opened the private, not-for-profit institute in 1978. But his interest in using sound patterns to explore the mind began in the mid-1950s, sparked by the possibility that people could learn while asleep. A successful radio-broadcasting executive whose company produced 28 shows a month, Monroe dedicated an arm of his firm to research and development, and volunteered to serve as the chief test subject. It was a decision that would lead to what he described as a “terrifying” experience in 1958.

As Monroe tells it in a video recorded before his death in 1995, he was lying in bed on a Friday night, thinking about the weather the next day, when he felt something bump against his shoulder.

“I did not know where I was until I saw this funny sort of a fountain coming out of what I thought was the floor. And I thought, ‘Where am I? This is a funny kind of dream.’ And I looked more closely, and I thought, ‘There is something terribly wrong. This is not a fountain. This is the chandelier.’ ”

He looked down, he says, to see his wife lying in bed next to a man. Curious about whom it might be, he moved closer.

“Then, this great shock came over me because this person in bed with my wife was me. And then the fright came, the terror. What am I doing? Am I dying?”

He would describe it as his first of many out-of-body experiences in his book, "Journeys Out of the Body." The book, published in 1971, has sold 300,000 copies and is credited with popularizing the term "out-of-body experience."

Monroe and his team ultimately developed Hemi-Sync, an audio technology based on the premise that certain tones can encourage the two hemispheres of the brain to synchronize and move into different states of consciousness. To give the public access to this technology, Monroe made numerous recordings that, when used with headphones, send slightly different tones through each ear, helping the brain to create a third "binaural" beat. The result: a collection of compact discs that purportedly can be used for everything from inducing sleep to increasing memory retention to, as the institute entices on its Web site, reaching "extraordinary" states.

Over the years, Hemi-Sync has garnered three patents and been the subject of research both at the institute and by independent medical professionals, scientists and academics. University studies have discovered that the audio technology can improve the focus of children with developmental disabilities. Several U.S. veterans have attended the institute, which is working on a program geared specifically toward helping this population reintegrate into their civilian lives.

Critics say that at its most harmless, the technology is a waste of money, and at its worst, sinister. Constance Cumbey, author of "Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism," says organizations such as the institute are made up of two groups: "The hypnotizers make money and the hypnotized spend a lot of money in their quest to get it, whatever it is."

In the past three decades, by the institute’s estimates, 30,000 people from around the world have attended its programs, and millions have purchased Hemi-Sync compact discs. For many, the experience is “life changing,” says Paul Rademacher, a pastor for 15 years before serving as the institute’s executive director for four years.

“We live in a society that tells us life is only as big as our five senses, but when you suddenly learn through your own experience that it is possible to transcend the physical world, then the boundaries of your world really broaden,” says Rademacher, who earned $84,000 annually in his position and was replaced late last year by Carol de la Herran. “Then, you have to ask yourself, ‘How big am I and what are the limits, if any, on my life?’ ”

This promise of enlightenment is why a group of people from as far as Turkey and as close as Central Virginia show up on a fall afternoon for the introductory Gateway Voyage program, each paying nearly $2,000 for the experience. So each is coming from a different place not only

geographically— but emotionally. A California woman is here looking for clarity after discovering her husband cheated on her for six years with prostitutes. A retired intelligence officer and now Chinese medicine and martial arts expert in Northern Virginia has come to further his understanding of how we heal ourselves.

I'm here to better understand a place that not even those who live in surrounding Nelson County know much about, and to see if, even one person at a time, the institute can fulfill its ambitious five-word vision statement: "The Global Awakening of Humanity."

***

My room is quaint, if a little underwhelming, until I notice the bed.

It's a nook cut into the wall, and to get inside you crawl through a black, double-layered curtain. Inside, you have the sense you are in a cushioned vault, undisturbed by light or sound. Above each mattress dangles headphones. We will slip them on several times a day, lie in the darkness and wait for Monroe's baritone voice to guide us into the unknown. Each time, the experience will change, forcing us to explore a different part of ourselves. In one, we will look for dull spots on our bodies that might need healing, and in another, we will envision where we want to be in a year or more.

On our first full day, we are introduced to a state of consciousness known as "Mind awake, body asleep." The recording begins with the sound of waves lapping against the sand and seagulls crying in the distance.

"Now, close your eyes and relax," Monroe instructs us. He then tells us to imagine "an energy conversion box," capable of holding all our distractions. "A box so strong that no one but you can open it. And nothing you put in it can get out unless you take it out.

"Now, close the lid on your box, close it tightly and turn away, turn away from your box, putting it behind you. Put it behind you and relax."

When my box is far in the distance, Monroe begins the slow count up to 10. With each number, I can feel a different body part go weightless. My feet, then my ankles, then my knees. I think about how this might be the first time ever that I've paid attention to every part of my body and how, because I'm aware of this thought, I'm not asleep.

Moments later, everything disintegrates into a blur. I hear snippets of conversation and see flashes of strangers, but I can't be sure I'm not dreaming. Monroe's voice snaps me back.

"You will move now back to full physical waking consciousness as I guide you," he says after less than an hour. "When I reach the count of 1, all of your five physical senses will be operating clearly, cleanly, sharply and beautifully."

Afterward, as will become part of the routine following most exercises, the group gathers in a peach-walled room in Monroe's old house. A chandelier dangles from the ceiling and a portrait on the wall depicts his daughter Laurie, a subtle glow around her head. Everyone takes a seat on the plush carpet, barefoot and ready to share.

"How many of you felt you had a mind-awake, body-asleep experience?" Kortum asks.

More than a few hands go up.

"And how would you describe it?"

"I couldn't move," one woman says.

"Definitely timeless and floating," another woman says.

"And yet aware of it at the same time," Kortum says.

Later that day, the other facilitator, Lee Stone, has the group stand in a circle and hold hands. Pay attention, he says, to the other person's palm. *I s it damp? Is it cold? Do you feel any vibrations?*

“Everyone here is a risk-taker,” he says.” Everyone here has a need to know and understand. In that, we are the same.”

***

Outside, a tall quartz crystal from Brazil appears to sprout from the ground, resembling a frozen geyser. Every once in a while, someone walks up and places a palm flatly against its cold surface, as if trying to absorb its strength.

Krishnan Chary and I sit on a stone bench nearby, watching. If the program were a class, Chary would sit in the front row. He is often the first to ask questions, and when the answers don’t make sense, he asks again.

Earlier that day, Stone told us that the next state of consciousness we would explore was called “expanded awareness.” “This is a good state of consciousness to ask questions and get answers,” he said. “Some people will get images. It’s going to be a little like having dreams. You’ll be getting imagery that is symbolic, and you’ll have to contemplate that.”

“Who gives these answers?” Chary asked.

Several people laughed, knowing that they would have to interpret that for themselves. Chary looked unfazed. He has lofty goals for the week and doesn’t want to miss any crucial details. He hopes to have an out-of-body experience and maybe see a few deceased relatives. But his main purpose is to bring the program to India.

Chary retired as a senior vice president of a multinational company, where he worked for 30 years. He currently serves as a management consultant and as the lead examiner for India’s equivalent of the Malcolm Baldrige award, which recognizes excellence in organizations.

But now, at 68, Chary’s main project is himself. After his wife died five years ago from a stroke, he began meditating five hours a day. “I find no time for anything else,” he says. He has also intensified his studies of spirituality.

For him, the program is a way to reach God — even if it can’t be done in a week.

“Everything happens to people when they are ready for it, not one second before,” he says. “If you want to learn to play the violin, can it happen in five days? And the violin is nothing compared to this.”

***

Howard Broadman overhears two women expressing their frustrations with the last exercise. In the past few days, we followed Monroe as he instructed us to visualize a balloon around our bodies, one capable of protecting us from any threats, and another time to allow a tiny, imagined dolphin to swim through us, healing any ailments along the way. This last time, we were told to toss questions into the universe and wait for answers.

Broadman’s didn’t come, and it seems he’s not alone. Near the kitchen, he hears one of the women, an insurance adjuster from Virginia, questioning why she’s here.

“Paint dries very slowly,” she tells the group when we gather to discuss the exercise. “I just perceived a blank white wall, and nothing happening.”

“Could this have anything to do with your purpose?” Kortum, one of the facilitators, asks. Answers can come in unexpected ways, he has told us.

“I’m just saying, ‘Hello, is anyone there?’ ” she says, defeated. “So, apparently not.”

A yoga instructor from Turkey, who is debating life as a vegetarian, says she witnessed meatballs flying toward her. Only a few minutes pass before the insurance adjuster speaks again. She says she has given her white wall some thought.

"Normally, I have a monkey mind," she says, meaning she's easily distracted. "And I just spent *forty-five* minutes looking at a blank wall and was not inundated with thoughts."

She looks satisfied now. Kortum nods. Then he adds, to underscore her accomplishment, “and in tranquillity.”

Later, Broadman scoffs. The white wall didn’t mean anything, he says. “One of the questions for me is: Why do they want to believe so badly?” A judge for 14 years in California, Broadman got paid to weigh facts and testimony before making decisions. On the bench, he earned a reputation for controversial verdicts, including one that almost got him killed. In 1991, a man walked into Broadman’s courtroom and aimed a .357 magnum at his head. The bullet missed only because Broadman happened to bend over in that instant.

At 61 and now a mediator, Broadman is here, he says, because he genuinely wants to be more open to experiences beyond his comfort zone. This far into the week, though, his experiences haven’t exactly been soul shaking. Others have described seeing white beings against white walls and long-gone relatives, but he has had none of that.

Everyone is encouraged to keep a journal, and early on Broadman writes: “I could quit, except that they say: 1) Trust the process; 2) I don’t have anything else to do; 3) I paid a lot; 4) Maybe it will work, and the balance is there is no downside risk. Perhaps this class is an attempt to reestablish innocence, i.e. learn something so new just like a child does every day.”

A man in dress slacks and a collared shirt sits cross-legged on the floor. He introduces himself as Joe McMoneagle and says he was the first member of the U.S. government's experimental psychic spying program. He was Remote Viewer 001, he says, capable of sitting in one place and describing in detail another location. (According to documents declassified in the 1990s, the program, started in the 1970s and eventually dubbed Star Gate, was first run by the CIA, then the Defense Intelligence Agency. A government-commissioned group eventually found it too unreliable and inconsistent for spying purposes.)

McMoneagle says he worked under five presidential administrations. “Going to work every day was like a knife fight in a phone booth,” McMoneagle says. “You never knew who your friends were.” Other countries, such as Russia, were much more embracing of similar programs, he says. “I’m not the only person to go out of body. Terrorists can. It’s stupid to bury your head in the sand.”

McMoneagle says he first came to the Monroe Institute in the 1980s. He wanted to find a way to “cool down” more quickly from one remote-viewing assignment to another. For 14 months, he worked directly with Monroe, who eventually created a recording just for him.

More than 10,000 people across the world have been tested for remote-viewing skills and not one person has shown zero capability, McMoneagle says. “So, I’m sorry, you are all psychic,” he tells the group. “It’s part of being human.”

McMoneagle describes how, during the Iran hostage crisis, he tried to psychically distinguish the Americans from their Islamist captors. On the subject of UFOs, he says, “To think we’re the only intelligent species is ridiculous.”

Broadman raises his hand. He says that he is struck by how McMoneagle believes with certainty that these often doubted phenomenon exist.

“I also know psychic ability is real,” McMoneagle says.

“But that’s not the norm,” Broadman says.

“It should be,” McMoneagle says.

***

Each time we crawl into our cushioned vaults we are encouraged to ask ourselves questions we might not during the course of otherwise busy days. The woman whose husband cheated on her can't decide if she should divorce him. During one exercise, she sees herself and their three children appearing happy at their old house, a place she told herself she would go if she left him.

"How many are getting something out of this?" Kortum asks, referring to the overall program. Eighteen of the 20 hands go up.

"And how many feel nothing at all is happening for you?"

Krishnan Chary and one other man raise theirs.

Rademacher says those who come here with the highest expectations usually find the least success. By Monroe's estimates, 15 percent of participants will have an out-of-body experience, but Rademacher says people can focus so much on that that they fail to perceive other developments.

On a sheet of general guidelines for the program, the first line reads: "Most importantly . . . don't try, don't force anything."

***

A bell rings, indicating another exercise. We slip on our headphones as usual, and, per Monroe's instructions, try to feel vibrations flowing through us.

"Follow the sound, let yourself follow the sound and the change in the pulse," Monroe tells us. "Now let the vibration move upward more and more. . . ."

When we meet later to discuss the exercise, Broadman speaks first. Until now, he has said little during group discussions. "The vibe flow for me was almost a shattering experience," he says, sounding both awed and bewildered. "I vibrated. I don't vibrate. It started at my toes and went right through my body."

"Besides feeling shattered, was there any other emotion it brought up for you?" Stone, the facilitator, asks.

Broadman holds his empty palms upward. Before meeting with the group, he tried to analyze what happened. *How could putting on a set of headphones make him vibrate?*

Broadman looks at Stone and Kortum. They have been telling the group for days that there is more than can be seen, more than logic can prove. "Just, thank you," he says.

The next day, the group takes a silent walk. Kortum explains that the purpose is to show us how states beyond our everyday consciousness can be accessed from anywhere. We don't need a bed cut into a wall.

Several people walk slowly down the gravel road, aware of each pebble underfoot. Others lumber between the trees, eyeing falling leaves. Chary pays attention to the wind, later saying that he could hear the Hemi-Sync in it.

Afterward, when the group gathers, Broadman speaks first.

"I've taken thousands of walks," he says. "But I will never forget that walk."

All eyes are focused on him.

"I took my time," he says. "I followed a grasshopper, and I said, 'I'm not going to move until the bell rings or the grasshopper moves.' "

A few people lean forward. "And I watched," he says, "a grasshopper [defecate]." His entire body shakes as he laughs at the absurdity and profundity of this, and everyone in the room joins in. "I may not be seeing Jesus, but that was a great walk."

***

The last full day comes quickly, ushering in a surprising heaviness. “It’s not uncommon to have some post-Gateway blues,” Kortum tells the group. A few people swallow their tears.

The week has been intense, somehow relaxing and exhausting at the same time. As I look around the room, it occurs to me that while some people had profound moments during the recordings — one woman described channeling a spirit, and a man talked of sharing dinner with his late parents and brother — the program’s power, in part, lies in the opportunity for reflection. Everyone came here with the hope of expanding their view of the world, and for six days opened themselves up to possibilities they may not have otherwise considered. To different degrees, I think we will all leave changed, maybe awakened. Not because we traveled outside our bodies — most of us didn’t — but because we were forced to look deeply inside ourselves.

For the last time, we form a circle and, one by one, say

our goodbyes.

“I think I could learn to love blank walls,” the insurance

adjuster says.

“I used to let my mind control me, and now I control my

mind,” says the betrayed wife, who will later say that she has decided to leave her husband.

Chary’s eyes water as he speaks. Though he never had his out-of-body experience or saw any relatives, the payoff was still substantial. “I traveled 13,000 kilometers to be here,” he says. “I came with an open mind, and I think I received a lot more than I expected. All the scriptures of all religions talk about the ‘Universal Soul’ or the unity or oneness of all souls. After this program and meeting all of you guys, I don’t need any proof of that. Thank you. All of you.”

Broadman tells the group that he has decided to start walking to work. He will also have to rethink, as an atheist, the last of his three mantras in life: And then you die.

"I think," he says, "I'm going to have to change it to, 'And then you die. Or maybe you don't.' "

Theresa Vargas is a Washington Post staff writer.